

Aesthetica

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RANKIN
Beyond fashion
photography

BOB & ROBERTA SMITH
This artist is
deeply dangerous

GRAYSON PERRY
Exploring Britain's
unpopular culture

WOODSTOCK 40 YEARS
Woodstock remembered
The ideals behind the Festival



WHO *REALLY* IS THE ARTIST?

Resisting definitions and questioning
the role of the artist



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Miss Piggy, 140 cm x 100 cm, c-print. Part of the Artists Anonymous exhibition at Riflemaker Gallery, London. Courtesy the artist and Riflemaker. Used with kind permission.

Who *Really* is the Artist?

Artists Anonymous

THE LONDON AND BERLIN BASED COLLECTIVE RESIST DEFINITIONS AND SKILFULLY CREATE INTERPLAY BETWEEN ANONYMITY AND THE ARTIST.

To categorically define an artist – whether it is as a painter, sculptor or video artist – is to categorically fail in understanding the artist, as terminology is intrinsically delimiting. Artists Anonymous, a London and Berlin based collective, resist definition both as a group and as an etymological entity. It is impossible to label them as “painters”, though this is the starting (and often the end) point in their work: “We start with painting always; this is the basis of everything: this is what we did in the beginning.”

The refusal to stray from painting as a source and a favoured method of artistic production is of note, specifically as they compare themselves, in terms of structure and output, to that of the old artistic workshops of the decorative and fine arts. Successful contemporary artists still use the same essential arrangement that painters such as Rembrandt and silversmiths such as Paul de Lamerie used centuries ago: of a single chief artist with assistants and workers employed by him/her. One needs only to look at an artist such as Jeff Koons (who recently stated in an *Art Newspaper* interview, that his workshop/studio is comprised of roughly 120 assistants); or to Andy Warhol, Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst as other examples.



Installation view of Artists Anonymous' exhibition 'BIOSHOCK' at Ronmandos Gallery, Amsterdam (April - September 2009).





Left: *I Love the World and the World Loves Me*, 180 cm x 130 cm, c-print. Courtesy the artist and Rifemaker.
Below: *Pan Dreaming (...into the other world)*, C-print. Courtesy the artist and Rifemaker.



Success necessarily requires output; and it is therefore inevitable perhaps, though some artists refuse to take on assistants (e.g. Michael Raedecker), that help is acquired. The subtle (or perhaps not so subtle) difference between the work of Artists Anonymous and that of Koons, is that, unlike Koons, who is the “Great Artist” of his workshop (in much the same way as Rembrandt and

“We were more interested in the Old Master workshops, where many people worked in one room, where people were taught and from an early age, all these things, like actually finding out how the artist did it. They were also working together; maybe one gave his name to be the Master and every painting was signed by this name. But there was still a working process happening where everybody had to fulfil certain things in this process.”

Paul de Lamerie were), there is no individual named artist that we can identify within Artists Anonymous. It is neither integral to their work nor important to them to be singled out as individuals. “We were more interested in the Old Master workshops, where many people worked in one room, where people were taught and from an early age, all these things, like actually finding out how the artist did it. They were also working together; maybe one gave his name to be the Master and every painting was signed by this name. But there was still a working process happening where everybody had to fulfil certain things in this process.” They are quick to point out that it does not matter which profession you examine as, without fail, whether the person in question is a scientist or actor, there are people surrounding them that assist them in their work. Success is a social process through which, unavoidably, anonymity prevails for the surrounding support network.

Artists Anonymous, as a collective, developed quite naturally in that they

recognised the group process as integral to their creative process: “Actually we’re all painters, we’re all interested in process, and we’re all interested in art, and to find out how you’re actually doing it and doing it together gives us a chance to actually develop what we want to do. Through this there are things appearing that make this possible.”

Their work borders a tenuous line of classification, as it encapsulates painting, photography, performance, video, and installation – virtually all forms of “art”, including text. Inevitably though, they return to a vision of painting comparable to that as summarised by Jean Dubuffet, in his *Notes for the Well-Lettered*: “I’m in favour of confusion. Do not confine art, cut it off from the real world, keep it

in a trap. I want painting to be full of life – decorations, swatches of colour, signs and placards, scratches on the ground. These are its native soil.” Their vision of painting is that of the image-maker unbound by restrictions in medium; of producing from an initial source (the painting), the final piece, whether it be a photograph, installation, or performance. “There is a performance happening that’s then leading to photographs and then leading to painting; it is possible then that performance is first. But that we do performance at all started with that we were doing paintings.”

Though emphatic about the influence and presence of painting in their work, there is a performative quality as well, that cannot be ignored. Their *War* series (exhibited 2006 at Goff & Rosenthal), which they worked on for over three years, took on the subject of war as depicted through their performance and representation of *Apocalyptic Warriors*: “To paint war can be a very bad idea, if it is just about documenting how terrible war is. If suddenly one of your friends,

Right: *Alderley Edge*, 150 cm x 90 cm, c-print. Courtesy the artist and Riflemaker.
 Below: *Miss Piggy*, 140 cm x 100 cm, c-print. Courtesy the artist and Riflemaker.



or yourself, is representing this figure and you try to figure out what kind of character part might match with that theme then it will be very interesting.” They personalise war through the adoption of these alter-egos; the reality is that soldiers must adopt an alter-ego of sorts when they engage in battle. Psychologically, it is a way of distancing oneself from the harsh reality of war and death. Artists Anonymous actively engage with this theme of reality versus the represented in their work, especially when dealing with subject matter that is quite volatile.

Previous works, such as *Hunger* (2006), have offered them the opportunity to use their work as a form of political and socio-economic critique. Specifically, with *Hunger* (which was bought by Charles Saatchi) they were given the chance to supply text to accompany the work, as it would be presented on the Saatchi online catalogue. Rather than shy away from the opportunity, they embraced it; the *Hunger* text builds on the initial work, and criticises the social pressures and economic and political situations, that have led to the current state of famine and poverty in third world countries. They were aware of the risk as artists, especially in terms of reputation and popularity, in making such a potent work, but felt the themes they were working with were important enough to take the chance. Truly, for them as a collective, there are only three options: “You have the option to do just conceptual, and maybe even political work, and you are generally speaking about this stuff, like about the world hunger problem, but it doesn’t have anything to do with you; you are just the ‘Great Artist’ who is talking about it.” This option, which quite frankly reeks of middle-class bourgeois apathy, is often too common in the current world. The second option is to produce visually beautiful images that critique nothing, and exist solely as a work, without a social or political framework binding it to a larger theme. The third option, and one not without a risk of offending, is that

which Artists Anonymous have chosen, and that they describe as: “You close this gap and say, it can be visually attractive, but it still can have an impact, and it is sometimes making it a bit more difficult to find out what it actually is, and maybe at times it is making it a bit more difficult to buy it.” Though more difficult to place with collectors, it is these works that tend to resonate the most, especially with those collectors and institutions willing to take the risk.

This is the ingenious quality of their work: the risk factor. For they risk disappearing into the fabric of art history, as individuals (though not as a collective); they risk offending the general public and losing the popularity they have garnered over the past (almost) decade; and they risk falling into the cracks institutionally as their work, as indefinable as it is, could be deemed too difficult to place within larger conservative art institutions. As they state what is important, is the art, and not professional economic success. Their upcoming show at Riflemaker, London this September, and their various other projects and exhibitions, support the quality of their work and the success of their taking this “risk”. For now, and in the future, they want to regress a bit, to step back and re-evaluate the creative process: “We had a task, when we started, that we wanted to find out some things; we found out some things about painting, about photography, about techniques. This is what is happening again now; it is always going in waves, you have waves where you do a lot of research, of exploring work, there is a time when you are actually just putting out. You get to a certain step and you can just do things.”

Niamh Coghlan